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Inhabiting the Garden: Bible, Theology and Mission

Abstract

This essay explores the role of biblical exegesis in the task of Christian theology and in the contemporary global mission of the church from the perspective of an Old Testament scholar. It poses the question what a biblical exegesis would look like that was consistently Christian in its assumptions while, at the same time, honest and competent in dealing with the phenomena of the biblical text. Using the exegesis of the early centuries of the church as a case study, the essay develops insights into the role of serious biblical study in empowering the early church's vibrant expansion through the entire known world, shaping its clarification of the essential tasks and content of Christian theology, by competently integrating both literal and spiritual dimensions of the Bible's meaning into a coherent process of biblical interpretation.

Key Words: Bible, theology, mission, patristics, exegesis, hermeneutics, literal, spiritual, typology, allegory

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It almost sounds like a joke. “Four rabbis went into a bar. ” But it’s actually a very serious rabbinic legend. Four imminent rabbis, according to the legend, entered a garden. The first one, Simeon Ben Azzai, dropped dead. The second rabbi, Simeon Ben Zoma, lost his mind. The third, Elisha ben Abuyah, lost his faith and became the most reviled, infamous apostate in the history of Judaism. Only the fourth, Rabbi Akiva, emerged from the garden alive.¹

Most hearers of that story would say, “Stay out of that garden!” But what was this place of death, insanity, and spiritual peril from which only the greatest of rabbis emerged whole? In rabbinic Hebrew the word for “garden” in this story is *pardes*, the famous acronym for the four senses of scripture in classical Jewish exegesis.² The legend hints darkly at the hazards menacing those daring entry into the “garden” of the senses of the Scripture ill prepared. Exegesis is not for sissies.

The story hits home in the world of contemporary scholarship in Bible, theology and mission. The uninitiated new seminarian or young scholar encounters a mélange of disconnected methods, a cacophony of voices, and a welter of ideologies, enforced by the powerful resources of scholarly organizations, publishers and academic administrations. Jewish philosopher, linguist, and culture critic George Steiner has characterized tribalized academic journalism—what we often call “scholarship”—as “covens which celebrate this or that rite of explication.”³ And, we might add, eager for new initiates. The student began simply enough with a love for God and the scriptures and a passion for souls to be brought to Christ. But now she feels an undertow, a pull toward the predilections and preoccupations of the academy. A new acculturation begins. Then she hears the insistent demands of a church all too often in the tank with popular culture, impatient with reflective analysis and resentful of boundaries and impediments in its rush to relevance. Pity the student who, lacking the wisdom, fortitude, and spiritual survival skills of Rabbi Akiva, finds the garden of scriptural sense a very dangerous jungle. There be dragons.

The most fruitful course through this jungle probably does not lie on the path of contemporary movements of revision or reaction. I doubt a new “theological exegesis” or hermeneutical incantation will put the pieces back together. Instead, we should attend to the exact meaning of our clichéd insistence on uniting heart and head. Exactly how do we achieve a genuinely learned and intellectually responsible biblical interpretation in the context of a robust love of God’s truth and a vibrantly missional church life? I hunger for self-consciously Christian counsel on the interpretation of the Bible that still respects the text’s own voices, still listens. I grieve the present sterile impasse between modernity and post-modernity. I suspect that recent popular narratives about the history of hermeneutics too easily schematize

the history of interpretation and self-servingly exaggerate selected distinctions among the so-called pre-critical, critical and post-critical eras.⁴ These concerns have driven me farther and farther back in search of interpreters who share our post-apostolic position while evincing an urgent and lively connection with the text as a transformative divine word. I increasingly find myself among those who sense the best answers come from the formative era of the Church, beginning with *First Clement*, a product of the late first/early second century, and extending possibly as late as the death of Bede the Venerable (735) or John of Damascus (750).⁵ I confess that as an OT scholar whose research competence lies in the Late Bronze/Iron I cultural transition in Syria-Palestine, who knows more about Hebrew verbs, Egyptian chariotry and Philistine swords than I do early Christian history and theology, I enter the jungle of patristic hermeneutics with some disquiet.⁶ What follows is not a definitive statement, but a report on what I have learned so far—perhaps even a cry for help!⁷

Whenever the theme of the Bible in the early church comes up, theological pundits array themselves into several camps. One loudly declaims the “superiority of pre-critical exegesis” while pillorying historical criticism, which, admittedly, offers a target-rich environment!⁸ Others recoil in horror from specters of wild allegory or, worse, the threat that the OT might actually end up being read in the light of the Christian revelation. Still others celebrate patristic exegesis, finding in its apparent claims for multiple meanings a warrant for the post-modern claim of polyvalence in texts, glibly asserting close fellowship of Augustine and Chrysostom with Derrida, Foucault, and Lyotard, to the surprise of them all!⁹

My explorations of this “jungle” of early Christian exegesis has crystalized in three observations that have provided me with fresh directions in every facet of my own exegetical labors and which, I trust, will help any aspiring to be thoroughly Christian and rigorously exegetical as we serve the advancement of kingdom of Christ in our world.

The Bible in Mission

First, the early church’s distinctive engagement with scripture figures substantially in the explosive expansion of early Christianity. We should note here that the early Christians evangelized their entire known world. Cultures existed of which the early Christians knew nothing. But in every culture they knew, they sought to plant churches.¹⁰ Some thrived, some flopped. But from Ireland to China, from Russia to Ethiopia, the early Christian movement spread to every culture they knew, despite persecutions, despite being a marginal sect, without the help of cultural anthropology, faith-promise pledging, Facebook or even PowerPoint, though I take some comfort knowing they did have seminaries, of a sort! The Bible played a

central role in this projection of the Christian faith to the whole known world.¹¹ So important was scripture in the early centuries of the church that Christians had, virtually, to invent, a vastly expanded form of the “notebook,” that is, the *codex* rather than the scroll, to get the Bible into a form more usable in its mission. They pioneered and enormously expanded the practical utility of this previously minor medium of information storage and retrieval.¹² Francis Young reminds us that the patristic era, the 2nd-6th century A.D., was perhaps the most literate era in human history prior to the 19th-20th century and that the adoption of the codex constituted a vital cross-cultural initiative.¹³ In fact, the story of the expansion of Christianity could be told as the story of the translation of the Bible.¹⁴ This missionally directed technological innovation also re-situated the study of the scriptures from the formal exclusivity of sacred liturgy, where scrolls dominated, to the lectern, the study and the classroom where codices became the form taken by texts to be studied closely and even critically.¹⁵ Moreover, the shift to codices profoundly affected how readers perceived the scriptures. The entire Bible in one book provided both a linear sequence and immediate “random access” to any passage, making intertextuality and a comprehensive canonical awareness palpable features of Christian reading, a quality instantly obvious to anyone reading patristic exegesis. The early church’s engagement with scripture fed, enabled and energized the moral fulfillment of the Great Commission and the adaptations to mission reciprocally shaped how the church experienced the scriptures.

In connection with presenting the gospel to every known culture the early church did something else quite striking. Periodically, historians of doctrine depict pre-Nicean Christianity as a non-philosophical, primarily ethical devoid of metaphysical speculation, friendly to diversity, not preoccupied with awkward ideas like the Trinity or *perichoresis* or hypostatic union. By contrast, Nicean and Post-Nicean Christianity morphed into a gigantic system contaminated by Hellenistic philosophical ideas and corrupted by Roman power.¹⁶ Sometimes such narratives also assert the facile but invalid contrast between claims of a dynamic, practical and ethical “Hebraic mentality” found in the ministry of Jesus, that mutated under the pressure of the more abstract and sterile speculative logic of a “Greek mentality” that emerged in Paul and came to fruition in the dogmas of Nicean and Post-Nicean Christianity.¹⁷ Wolfhart Pannenberg exposed the weaknesses of this argument decades ago, in an article entitled “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” which appeared in a book entitled, ironically, *Basic Questions in Theology!* Pannenberg here demonstrated that in fact, the conquest and assimilation went the other direction.¹⁸ Early Christian thought was so vibrant that it commandeered as its own inheritance the intellectual

and cultural legacies of Greece and Rome, transformationally re-inhabiting these cultures and reciprocally infusing them with a new energy. Likewise, Young speaks of early Christianity's "potentially supersessionary claim in relation to all of ancient culture" in which "with astonishing audacity, a small persecuted community of oddly assorted persons with no natural kinship, no historical identity, claims a universality which challenges the most powerful tradition in ancient society" ¹⁹

Speaking of the biblical preaching of the bishops of the 4th century, Charles Kannengieser has observed precisely this dynamic in the biblical preaching of the 4th century urban bishops:

By addressing audiences of newly converted men and women, the bishops, many of whom were themselves adult converts, proceeded to retrieve essential values of their own thousand-year-old culture. They would literally convert the past millennium in marking out, in terms precisely of their culture, a consistent definition of Christian beliefs. Christian leaders and interpreters built up a powerful theoretical construct in defense of their faith which implied a radical metamorphosis of Greek thought at the same time as it actualized the message of Jewish scriptures in the context of the Greek-speaking churches.²⁰

That Christian thought could seize and transform the language and ideas of the very cultures who thought to exterminate it did not dilute it, but manifested its vitality.

People like Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Origen, Augustine, Jerome, and others were right in the middle of these achievements of early Christianity. All were searching and serious interpreters of scripture. Justin was a debater and apologist who shows a surprising closeness to Jewish exegesis, even to forms of the Greek OT more at home in the synagogue than the church.²¹ Irenaeus, living at the edge of civilization in Lyon, France, spoke on behalf of a "great church" theology that would express the common faith through diverse cultural forms but still be recognizable as the same faith the world over while still distinguished from deviant theology, distortions, and heresy.²² Origen, in the yeasty ferment of Alexandria confounded Heretics, Jews and Pagans in debate, but was beloved by his greatest adversaries outside the faith—though reviled by many inside! Augustine, that "purpose driven pastor" of late 4th to 5th century North Africa, preached to throngs of seekers and believers alike, shouldering both pastoral and administrative burdens though his first love was, in fact, biblical scholarship. John Chrysostom was the eloquent expositor of North Syria who could also sympathize with his sleepy congregants as the lamps in church were lit or rebuke sharply his audience for skipping church to attend the races! Though

it lacked the resources of cultural or economic coercion, the early church decisively engaged local and regional cultures and gained a hearing.²³ Though not *authoritarian* through coercion, the church was *authoritative* by through effective persuasion achieved by a high level of penetrating biblical exposition.

The NT clearly expects the Christian Faith to transform and transcend its Jewish origins; to fulfill and go beyond them, but without repudiating them. Charged with a global mission, the Christian faith had to be able to translate itself, without loss or corruption, into the expressive means of new cultures in order to infect them with the life-giving new self-replicating DNA of divine grace and the world-view transforming energy of Christian ideas. Virus like, the gospel could both merge with and utterly transform its host culture. The early church did not compromise the faith, but knew what the contemporary church, in its nervously self-conscious attempts at contextualization too easily forgets. A missional hermeneutic must *translate* the gospel to make it *accessible*, not *transform* the gospel merely to make it *acceptable*. The church fruitfully appropriates Greek or Roman, or any other culture's expressive forms knowing that the Gospel is potentially indigenous to *any* culture because it ultimately transcends *all* cultures.

The church's challenge today remains the same: to articulate with integrity the substance and detail of the faith in terms accessible and persuasive to our neighbors around the world. The church needs to use the tools and ideas that the surrounding culture provides to clarify and communicate the gospel forcibly and even to discern better the truth of its Gospel.²⁴ The early church's study of the Bible enabled it to do precisely that. The very motion of cultural self-transcendence enacted in the OT storyline of Israel's ongoing historical engagement with Yahweh, culminating in the incarnation, passion and ascension of Jesus, and embedded in the structure of the christian biblical canon, predisposed the Christian movement to adapt to any culture while maintaining its unchanging identity in Christ.

How faithful and effective is today's church in the face of the global cultural dimensions of our evangelistic and theological calling? Perhaps we can learn afresh from ancient Christianity how to recover an engagement with the Bible that will energize and inform a more meaningful and fruitful witness to contemporary cultures. None of these early leaders were perfect, nor can we simply drop their approaches and solutions down in our time, mimicking patristic techniques without implementing the underlying principles. Still, however distant we might be from these pre-modern exegetes, how they went about the study of scripture had everything to do with the evident excellence and faithfulness with which they fulfilled their vocations. As we seek to replicate and extend their achievements, we dare not ignore their insights into the craft of interpreting the Bible.

The Bible and Theology

A second achievement of emerging Christianity also illuminates its engagement with the Bible. The early church formulated the fundamental doctrines of the faith, in enduring forms that continue to set the standards for Christian theology. The early church wrestled with the great questions provoked by the Bible, but not definitively answered there. How can monotheists call Jesus “God?” How can Jesus be God and man at the same time? Was Jesus two natures in one body? Was he one person with two tendencies? *Somebody had to figure it out.* Someone like Athanasius.²⁵ Or take the trinity: is the Holy Spirit “God” or just a divine influence? Is the Holy Spirit a person? How do the Father, Son, and Spirit inter-relate? Are they just three “forms” taken by one God at different times? How can they be eternal if one is begotten and the other proceeds? The Bible provokes these questions, but does not provide a comprehensive answer. *Somebody had to figure it out.* Somebody like Augustine or, even earlier, the controversial Novatian.²⁶ Christians in the centuries following tried to improve on the answers arrived at by the earliest efforts of the church but, at their best, tended mainly to rediscover or reinvent patristic insights.²⁷

At the heart of this theological achievement raged an ongoing debate about how to interpret the Bible. More importantly, the heart of the heart of this discussion was the church’s reflection on the status of the OT.²⁸ The church has invested—I am tempted to say, “wasted”—now two or three generations in re-visiting a range of theological controversies, often under new and fetching titles, but essentially recapitulating tired, old debates in forms not even fresh, but duplicative of ancient error and heresy. A church in need of clarifying afresh the doctrines of the faith surely has something to learn from ancient Christianity about how to read the Bible theologically.

Ironically, the “biblical theology movement” of the mid-20th century, which aspired to address precisely such matters, fell short, perhaps because it did not learn from the ancient church what its true question should have been. Any survivor of a modern course of theology knows about the ponderous debate from Gabler to the present about the purpose of biblical theology and its derivative question regarding a “center” for OT theology. These discussions have become sterile exercises in diminishing returns. Worse, these questions prevent us from feeling the force of more fundamental questions. Listening to the early church has pushed me to ask a much more risky and more explicitly theological question: *How does God, by the Spirit, use the Bible to rule the church?* Employing an analogy to the human flesh of Jesus, ancient exegetes knew that the Bible, through its very nature as time-and-culture conditioned communication through human literature, mediated by the divine inspiration of its authors a capacity to resound and

relay divine speech, a word by which God discloses his character, purpose and will, transforms humanity and fulfills the prayer of Jesus, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.” In these time- and culture-contextualized words, the Christian finds the truth, and not just a subjective “for me” truth. We find the Truth of God, believed, in the words of Vincent of Lerins, everywhere, always, and by all.

Meaningful encounters with God in scripture surely happen periodically on any hermeneutical approach. The Holy Spirit reigns over the church and is not prevented by bad hermeneutics from breaking in on the church’s life. The church, however, is not called to exegetical sloth, counting on extraordinary divine intervention to make up the deficit! The challenge for scriptural hermeneutics is to discover for today the transforming hearing of God’s word in the disciplined study of scripture that was the norm for early Christianity. While none can domesticate the Spirit or pre-package the living voice of God, and while “steps” oriented methods that reduce interpretation to a sterile, mechanical process will fail, despite their business and bustle, I still wonder whether the church today is hearing that voice as frequently as our loquacious God would like. The whole enterprise of exegesis ought to culminate frequently, even if not predictably, in that kind of encounter with the Truth. If exegesis does not regularly arrive at that point, why do it? Few would doubt that Irenaeus, Origen, Jerome, and Augustine, and later, Aquinas, Nicholas of Lyra, and Erasmus got serious traction on scripture as the executive means of God’s lordship over the church. As the framers and tradents of Christian language and ideas, their discourse generated the whole subsequent Christian consciousness of the canon and the practice of theological exegesis. Indeed, some thinkers have argued that the patristic exegesis of the 2nd-6th centuries, in its passionate conviction that the patient, scrupulous analysis of “the words” could in fact disclose “The Word,” birthed the distinctive rationality and hermeneutic norms that have underwritten the finest achievements of literate western culture.²⁹

At the heart of the classical, patristic exegetical practice rests a single concept, all too easily distorted and parodied, but essential to their work: the “rule of faith.” Anyone educated theologically in the last 100 years has inherited the prejudiced view of the rule of faith as an alien ideology forcibly imposed on a texts ill suited to them. We can almost hear the shudder of horror in Walter Brueggeman’s voice as he breathlessly warns that hearing the OT according to a rule of faith, leads to the “odd outcome of . . . an unqualified embrace of the Tridentine inclination to subject the text and its possible interpretation to the control of church categories.”³⁰ Brueggeman of course begs the question whether the character and purpose of God, his grace, and salvation might be themes at home in the pages of the OT and

NT, and whether contemporary ideologies of relativism and pluralism are not even more alien to these texts! Originating as it did at least as early as Irenaeus in the 2nd century, prior to the great doctrinal controversies of subsequent centuries, the rule of faith can hardly be equated with the creeds and formulations of the councils. The rule of faith in fact even precedes the general recognition of the NT canon. The church in its first post-apostolic century had the OT, primarily in Greek, a body of Christian writings that had not yet crystalized into a fixed canon, and the “rule of faith.”³¹ Reading in the formative era of early Christianity, the second century, the time of the Apostolic Fathers and the Apologists, discloses two realities that were simply facts of these persons’ existence as Christians. First, they affirm without reservation, hesitation, or qualification that the *text* of scripture, specifically the OT, stands as the word of God, even though the OT on its plain sense does not use the distinctive vocabulary of post-incarnation Christianity. Second, the early Christian preachers and teachers live in the contemporary reality of the church’s knowledge of God in Jesus Christ through the Spirit. This latter experience took the form of the living memory of the apostolic teaching. Early Christian leaders saw these indisputable facts as two simultaneous dimensions of one single revelation of God. On the one hand, the Text, the scriptures: a large, rather wild and unruly body of divine truth, the great mosaic. On the other hand, the Christian reality, the *hypothesis* of the whole Bible, which could be summarized easily by Irenaeus in his *Demonstration of Apostolic Preaching* in just a few lines already adumbrating the trinitarian structure of the creeds. Earlier, the prophetic proof-texting of Justin Martyr clung to an order of presentation curiously identical to later creedal formulations.³² And the formative era writers instinctively and unself-consciously see these two media as manifestations of one and the same divine truth. They do not join them, they experience them as already one piece. This unity of the text of scripture with the content, the reality, of the Christian faith is what these writers name “the rule of faith.” It was not a rule one had to adhere to, but was simply the fact that scripture was divine revelation, and the subject matter of that revelation was the knowledge of God in Jesus Christ. There were the words, and there was the Word. One did not “obey” the rule of faith, rather good interpretation simply exposed it.

More than is typically acknowledged, early christian exegetes did recognize and respect the differences between these two aspects of biblical revelation and struggled to integrate the “pre-incarnational” character of the OT with the revelation of God in Christ. Two voices in the early church epitomize this watershed insight.³³ On the one hand, we have Marcion of Sinope. Marcion had become wealthy in the shipping business and after moving to Rome around 140, had made a large donation to the Roman church. Shortly,

he declared himself the true “apostle of Jesus Christ” started his own church, and created his own canon of scripture.³⁴ Marcion read the OT closely and grasped its pre-Christian character so clearly that he concluded that it in fact had nothing to do with the Christian faith beyond serving as an inferior prologue to be discarded once the superior religion of Christ and Paul appeared. His biographer, Adolph Von Harnack, agreed, famously asserting:

To reject the Old Testament in the second century was a mistake which the Church rightly repudiated; to retain it in the sixteenth century was a fate which the Reformation could not yet avoid; but to continue to keep it in Protestantism as a canonical document after the nineteenth century is the consequence of religious and ecclesiastical paralysis.³⁵

Marcion missed the rule of faith by seeing only the literal, or remote character of the OT, sheared off from the larger context of the culmination of its own inner historical movement in Christ. Divorcing the text from the testimony, the words from the Word, he rejected the OT and any part of the NT that depended upon it. The church reacted vigorously, expelling Marcion and asserting in the strongest possible terms the unity of the OT with the redemption God achieved in Christ. The Roman church also returned Marcion's money!

The rule of faith could also be missed on the other side. A curious illustration is the *Epistle of Barnabas*.³⁶ Barnabas also read the OT quite closely. Like Marcion, he saw the OT's absence of explicit reference to uniquely Christian ideas, and indeed, material in the OT that seemed to conflict with the Christian revelation. But where Marcion turned left, Barnabas turned right. Barnabas denies that the OT possesses any literal sense, but only a hidden, allegorical sense. He asserts that no change occurred in the divine economy between Moses and Jesus, but that only one covenant ever existed, one which the Israelites of Moses' era rejected. When Moses shattered the tablets, the covenant was lost, hidden, only to be restored, in the same form in which Moses offered it, by Jesus. Barnabas taught that in fact, the Jews had made a catastrophic blunder in their approach to the Torah and, later, in reading their scriptures. When the Hebrews made the golden calf at Mt. Sinai and Moses shattered the two tables of the covenant, the Jews were permanently cut off from the covenant, which now belonged wholly and exclusively to the future Christian church. The Jews, in attempting to interpret and apply the OT literally, such as by following the levitical dietary laws, were deceived by an evil angel and blinded to the Christian meaning hidden beneath the surface of the text. Each forbidden food, for example, represented a moral vice to be avoided, not a food taboo. Thus where Marcion ripped the OT away from the church, asserting its alien, pre-

incarnation character, Barnabas articulates a radical supersessionism that disinherited the synagogue, denying the literal, historical sense of the text. Unlike Marcion, Barnabas was not excommunicated. He suffered perhaps a more ignominious fate. Even though his epistle actually appears bound in the NT of the 4th century *Codex Sinaiticus*, and even though Hippolytus loosely alludes to this epistle as “scripture,” these potential honors did not change the fact that, on the role of the OT, Barnabas was ignored. One scholar even declares that Barnabas’s interpretation was “the stuff of madness” that found neither condemnation nor disciples.³⁷

A positive and early Latin example comes from the essay by the “anti-pope” Novatian regarding the Jewish dietary laws.³⁸ While he accepted these laws as standards governing the ancient Israelites, he recognized their explicit suspension in the NT, thus setting up the essential problem of the OT for Christian faith. Novatian digs into the canonical context and shows how the most strongly proscribed animals, the “creeping things” in Leviticus 11, are actually identified in Genesis 1 as especially blessed by God and declared “good.” He therefore explains that Moses gave the dietary laws not to protect humans from eating gross things, but rather, to protect these creatures from unrestricted consumption and exploitation by humans. He also pointed to the flood story, after which humans were authorized to eat any animals they wished, showing that these animals are not in fact, injurious to consume (Cf. Gen. 9:1-4). The dietary restriction was thus distinctly tied to the Sinai covenant and the peculiar role Israel played in the history of redemption. Novatian observes that even though the dietary laws do not bind Christians, still they affirm self-control and freedom from impulsion by fleshly appetites while also engendering a respect for the goodness of God’s creation by protecting certain elements of it from human consumption. He then connects this principle with NT statements about diet, such as Paul’s claim not to eat meat or drink wine if the kingdom or a brother’s welfare requires such abstinence. Novatian thus respected the OT context of the dietary laws, their non-regulatory status for Christians, but nevertheless discerned in these obscure levitical rules important continuing values for his persecuted Christian readers, embodying well the theological dynamic of the rule of faith.

The two integrated dimensions of the one rule of faith soon assumed a hermeneutical status. Just as an ellipse inscribes a line always maintaining a fixed distance from two loci, so christian preachers and listeners instinctively insisted on interpretations that oriented themselves around two poles. The OT had a remote, past, pre-christian sense, which was increasingly referred to as the “literal sense” or “letter.” At the same time, the OT bore anticipatory testimony to God’s redemption in Christ, increasingly referred to as the “higher” or “deeper” sense, the “spiritual sense” or most generally, the

anagogic sense. These two facts existed in formative Christian interpretation in fully complementary, simultaneous relation. The OT, existed to form Christian readers in the knowledge of God through Christ by the presence of the Holy Spirit in the church, and did so precisely as a text rooted, in its literal sense, in the pre-incarnation life of ancient Israel. What was needed was a way of articulating systematically this simultaneous “dual citizenship” of the OT represented by the rule of faith so that Christians could expound the scriptures for the enrichment and instruction of the church, debate Jews and pagans, and demonstrate the coherence of Christianity with its Hebrew heritage.

A major turning point comes with the work of Irenaeus in the late 2nd century. Irenaeus recognized the pre-Christian status of the OT, that it does not explicitly name the content of the Christian faith.³⁹ In his *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching*, he begins with a faith summary in Trinitarian form, but his reading of the OT narrative then proceeds very little christological application. He lets the storyline carry the meaning, separating the OT narrative leading up to Christ from a more traditional set of “proofs from prophecy” drawn from the OT, largely duplicating the work of Justin Martyr.⁴⁰ Irenaeus avoided two kinds of Christian moves with the OT. He repudiated any attempt to discard the OT, but more importantly, he also repudiated any attempt to change the OT, to redact it, so that it gave a more Christian-friendly witness.⁴¹ He is the first we know of (so far) to use the term “New Testament” as a title for the 27-book Christian “supplement” to the Hebrew scriptures. Thus Irenaeus becomes the architect of the canonical architecture of “two testaments, one Bible.” His affirmation of the unity of their underlying theological subject matter did not alter his recognition, expressed centuries later by Karl Barth, that, with respect to God’s self-revelation in Christ, the OT is a witness of expectation, while the NT is a witness of recollection.⁴² Of course, Irenaeus recognized the force of the NT proclamation to recontextualize the OT witness, but he understood it as a laying bare of a more fundamental quality of the OT, not the brute shifting or changing of the text’s meaning. He did not see the OT as “polyvalent” and so capable of meaning anything, but saw the gospel as disclosing a meaning already present in the text, because it is the truth that summoned the text forth in the first place. Irenaeus accomplished this by shifting the standpoint from which one reads it and by discerning its goal. So Irenaeus expounded one the earliest known versions of *Heilsgeschichte* in which the OT served as a gradual education of humanity to prepare the way for the incarnation.

In Irenaeus we see the fundamental motion of Christian reading, especially of the OT. We read it “in process” as the “Old” Testament, but we also read it aware of an inner trajectory toward the incarnation and NT.

Thus a complementary relationship exists between the text on the one hand and the gospel on the other. The unity does not preclude the difference, the difference did not contradict the unity.

Biblical Interpretation for Theology and Mission

The third achievement of the ancient church in its engagement with the scriptures was the unleashing of coherent, convincing programs of biblical study and exposition that were both pastoral and missional. No interpretive approach can succeed if the mass of preachers and teachers in the church cannot step into their pulpits and “preach the word.” But the sheer mass of patristic exegesis from the 3rd-5th centuries staggers bibliographic imagination and testifies to the church hitting its stride. Moving beyond Irenaeus, we discover that the two aspects of the rule of faith, the Text and the Testimony, the media of revelation and its living subject matter, become more clearly defined and distinguished. Whatever differences might separate the exegetical sensibilities of the two famous “schools” of Alexandria and Antioch, one famous for allegory, the other for a stress on history, both of these schools shared this same sense that the text of scripture was at once distinct from, but integrally united with, the reality of Christian truth and experience. Both schools discerned in their exegesis a literal sense, and both sought to discern beyond the literal sense a normative level of reading for contemporary believers, not merely as an inference from the past, but here and now. Both discerned a phenomenon in the biblical narrative by which every work of God participates in the unchanging character of God. Thus early works of God provide the basis for understanding subsequent divine actions, but these later actions likewise illuminate and clarify previous ones. A pervasive *mimetic* tendency, an emerging, multi-faceted set of internal analogies, flows through the sequence of events narrated through the Old and New Testaments, provided the basis for all attempts at anagogy (“higher” readings) whether the allegorizing of the Alexandrians or the more nuanced *theoria* sought by the Antiochene exegetes.⁴³

The principle difference between the two schools appears to have been that the Alexandrians believed that once the underlying, changeless and eternal truth to which the Bible testifies was known, the actual process of its historical unfolding and the extended, complex narrative structure of the text’s witness could then be dissolved so that all texts could be heard to articulate fully developed Christian truths. The analogical device serving the Alexandrian vision was allegory, in which the precise details of the text, the exact contours of its grammatical, literary sense, generated a derivative theological statement framed in terms of unchanging Christian doctrine, but whose inner logic mirrored the inner logic of the text’s literal sense. The allegory served as a kind of pantograph: a pen moves over the surface

structure, the literal sense of the text, and an attached pen, writing in a different color, on a difference surface, perhaps at a different angle and on a different scale, makes exactly comparable movements. Thus a “good” allegory is “good” precisely because its application mirrors exactly and sympathetically the inner logic and movement of the literal sense, the same logic translated to a different level or plane.⁴⁴

“Levels” are exactly what we associate with Alexandrian allegory, with the well-known analogy drawn by Origen in his manual of exegesis, called *On First Principles*, between the human as body, soul, and spirit, and the text as literal, moral, and spiritual.⁴⁵ At every point, “the letter” pointed to an analogously constructed discourse in which Christian truth was articulated fully. But the important point remains the dependence of the allegory, at its best, whether it be Christ and the church or the Word and the Soul, upon a meticulous reading of the text’s surface, or literal sense. In fact, allegory created in Origen a deep curiosity and even a fierce honesty about the literal sense of the text. Origen felt every ripple or tension in the text and argued that apparent contradictions, points of offense to logic or sensibility functioned intentionally to push the reader to higher levels of explication. Thus Origen could honestly face the various tensions in the narratives of Genesis 1 and 2 without sensing a threat to faith. Regarding these, he wrote:

What intelligent person can believe that there was a first day, then a second and third day, evening, and morning, without the sun, the moon, and the stars; and the first day—even if this is the right term—even without a heaven? Who is foolish enough to believe that, like a human farmer, God planted a garden to the east in Eden and created in it a visible, physical tree of life from which anyone tasting its fruit with bodily teeth would receive life; and that one would have a part in good and evil by eating the fruit picked from the appropriate tree? When God is depicted walking in the garden in the evening and Adam hiding behind the tree, I think no one will doubt that these details point figuratively to some mysteries by means of a historical narrative which seems to have happened but did not happen in a bodily sense.⁴⁶

Origen’s method delivers him from the need for strained harmonizations as he can accept the literal sense, with all its problems, and even display a certain sensitivity to what we could call issues of genre, particularly passages where he claims he can find no “bodily” or literal meaning. His discussion is not hard to translate into a more contemporary sensitivity to genre. Indeed, some of the best discussions of the literal sense of scripture in patristic exegesis appear in volumes analyzing Origen’s exegesis.⁴⁷

Not surprisingly, the allegorist learned Hebrew, poured himself into a massive 7000 page project of textual collation, wrote innumerable notes and essays engaging the various textual and historical conundrums of the Bible, wrestling with problems with chronology, investigating the extent of Moses' contribution to the Psalter, exploring whether the Psalms reflect a chronological ordering, identifying spurious additions or scribal lapses in scripture, researching whether a solar eclipse happened when Jesus was crucified, and much more.⁴⁸ His debate about the authenticity and canonicity of the Song of Susanna in his correspondence with the North African lay librarian, Julius Africanus, sounds like a debate between two 19th Century German source critics.⁴⁹ However bizarre it may seem, in its way, this method is quite close to the text, however disquieting the proximity.

While the interpreters of Antioch are often contrasted with the Alexandrians, as early as the late 2nd century they also operated with a dialectical, dual-poled interpretive model, though approached from a different direction context.⁵⁰ Chrysostom comments about the Jewish origins of the OT "though the books are from them, the books and their meaning belong to us."⁵¹ As a result, their sophistication comes not in the erection of a massive apparatus of figuration, but in probing into the text as an act of communication that generates a derivative sphere of possibility which the Antiochenes happily identify with the church's confession and witness. This more modest use of analogy receives the term *theoria*. George Steiner notes that *theoria* was an ancient notion with connotations both secular and ritual, telling of of "concentrated insight, of an act of contemplation focused patiently on its object" as well as "the deed of witness performed by legates sent, in solemn assembly, to observe the oracles spoken or the rites performed at the sacred Attic games."⁵² In this context, the Antiochene *theoria* denotes a sense of seeing the text fully, in all its dimensions, bearing witness to the divine truth served and conveyed in it. The net effect of the Antiochene sensibility was that of the literal sense, termed *historia*, as a boundary. The number of messianic prophecies could contract, for example, to no more than those identified in the NT, as in the exegesis of Theodore of Mopsuestia. More importantly, the Antiochene exegetes did not consider the text's testimony to the unchanging truth of the gospel to eclipse or collapse the inner development of the history of redemption through the OT and NT. As a result, the Antiochenes and those influenced by them at times failed to see the full range of the Bible's theological witness, a reticence that later, more theologically discriminating generations branded as heretical.

The early church articulated Christian truth in a remarkably widespread and enduring manner in large measure because it grasped both the particular, historical dimension of revelation, found in the text of scripture, and the ongoing reality of the gospel which scripture attests. Seizing upon the inner

analogies existing among the discrete revelatory acts of God narrated in scripture, and employing various modes of analogical extension, ancient Christian readers exploited the this complementary relation in vigorous, imaginative theological exposition. Some interpreters, the Alexandrians, stressed the culmination of the story of redemption so strongly as to dissolve the particularity of the pre-Christian witness, putting one pole of the relation at risk. Others, the Antiochenes, tended to confine their theological reflection to the boundaries of the biblical narrative and thus risked missing the full range of the biblical theological vision.

Such energy naturally culminated in attempts to synthesize the best insights of both schools. From the end of the Diocletian persecution (311) to the Council of Chalcedon (452), the two sensibilities I have described co-existed in a great exegetical “western synthesis” represented by Augustine, Jerome, Chrysostom, and the Cappadocians, and here we find early church exegesis in its finest flower alongside intentional reflection on method. Writers like Tyconius, for example, sought to compose rules governing how the process of analogy might work.⁵³ Augustine’s *De Doctrina Christiana* would, however, hold pride of place for articulating the hermeneutic of the western synthesis. The rule of faith became coherent rules of interpretation that authorized 150 years of creative preaching that was then imitated for the next 1000 years!

We only gesture here with broad strokes. The patristic exegesis of this era that persisted in holding the attention of subsequent generations of readers actualizes the “rule of faith” in a supple movement between two moments or poles in interpretation. Here I stress the first of these poles because it often is missing from discussions of patristic hermeneutics.⁵⁴ It is was the moment of remoteness, of remove, in which the Bible spoke from a time, place, and perspective that was not the reader’s position. Right alongside this, though, was a moment of address, in which scripture was heard speaking a transformative word to the church. This unified, but distinct dialectic between remoteness and address, distance and directness, has become my central interest. The moment of remove is not a de-canonization or secularization of the text, but frankly grasps the “otherness” of the text, just as the moment of address thus is not a sudden “spiritualizing” of a previously non-Christian or irrelevant word. The dimension or movement of remoteness is what came to be called the literal sense: the reader intentionally recognizes the otherness of scripture, its alienness. In a way, this makes concrete the transcendence of God, who is Other, as much as he is Immanuel. In the moment of remove interpreters rub their eyes and say “Is *that* in the Bible?” I’m thinking here of Augustine’s treatment of the binding of Isaac in his homily *De Scripturis* where he fearlessly refuses to deny the text’s historical truthfulness when confronted with its central horror.

At this point, he warns the reader:

Before all else, brothers, in the name of the Lord, this we admonish and enjoin upon you with as much force as we can: when you hear the mystery of the biblical narrative expounded, believe that things occurred just as recounted. Do not remove the foundation in actual events and try to build on air.⁵⁵

In grappling with the literal sense of the text, the church fathers employed skills commonly taught in the educational institutions in which they were trained.⁵⁶ These disciplines included translation, textual emendation, detection of interpolations and editorial interference in texts, clarification of the historical, topographical, and other elements of the text. Few in today's hermeneutical debates would readily predict Augustine would have urged the following:

Some scholars have made separate studies of all the words and names in Hebrew, Syriac, Egyptian, or any other language found in the holy scriptures that are used without any interpretation. They did this in these specialized areas to save the Christian student a lot of bother. . . In the same way I can see the possibility that if someone suitably qualified were interested in devoting a generous amount of time to the good of his brethren he could compile a monograph classifying and setting out all the places animals, plants, and trees, or the stones and metals, and all the other unfamiliar kinds of object mentioned in scripture. Perhaps indeed some or all of this has already been done; I have come across much information on which I did not realize that good and learned Christians had done research or written books. These things tend to remain unknown, whether because the bulk of scholars neglect them, or because jealous ones conceal them.⁵⁷

Most of the patristic authors studied the *scholia* on Homer and a host of other texts upon which they honed their craft as part of the typical *paideia* of late antiquity. Not least among these emphases was a wholesome respect for authors and the meanings they conveyed in their texts. Augustine, for example, wrote:

The aim of [the Bible's] readers is simply to find out the thoughts and wishes of those by whom it was written down and, through them, the will of God, which we believe these men followed as they spoke. . . It often happens that by thoughtlessly asserting something that the author did not mean an interpreter runs up against other things which cannot be reconciled with that original idea. If he agrees that these things are true and certain,

his original interpretation could not possibly be true, and by cherishing his own idea he comes in some strange way to be more displeased with scripture than with himself. If he encourages this evil to spread it will be his downfall.⁵⁸

Augustine invested enormous energy into the exegesis of the creation story, producing at least five expositions. Imagining a critic challenging him on how to adjudicate among the diverse possibilities of interpretation he had found in Genesis 1, Augustine penned wise words regarding the role of the author's original meaning:

And when we read in the divine books such a vast array of true meanings, which can be extracted from a few words, and which are backed by sound Catholic faith, we should pick above all the one which can certainly be shown to have been held by the author we are reading; while if this is hidden from us, then surely one which the scriptural context does not rule out and which is agreeable to sound faith; but if even the scriptural context cannot be worked out and assessed, then at least only one which sound faith prescribes. It is one thing, after all, not to be able to work out what the writer is most likely to have meant, quite another to stray from the road sign-posted by godliness. Should each defect be avoided, the reader's work has won its complete reward, while if each cannot be avoided, even though the writer's intention should remain in doubt, it will not be without value to have extracted a sense that accords with sound faith.⁵⁹

These disciplines were shared with their pagan debating partners and their educated listeners. The literal sense, to a significant degree, was thus a sense of scripture available to any empathetic, competent reader. A perusal of Augustine's *De Doctrina Christiana* reveals an almost obsessive concern for the grammatical, text-critical, and literary-rhetorical shape of the text, even if in the Latin translation.⁶⁰

Then there was Jerome, who demonstrated the untenability of the LXX as the basis for Christian exegesis and grounded the study of the OT in the Hebrew text, ultimately even winning over Augustine and establishing the principle that while Bible translations can certainly be the word of God for readers, the church dares not tie itself to any derivative text nor allow any translation, however widely loved, to usurp the original text. The church forgets this time and again, absolutizing first the LXX, then the Vulgate, then the King James Bible, and now, perhaps, the NIV. But Jerome secured his point, and *ad fontes* became the mantra for any who sought to tap the living root of the Christian faith.⁶¹

A fine sense of the plain meaning of the text even emerges from Athanasius in his pastoral letter on the Psalms.⁶² While he stresses that the

Psalms reveal to us Jesus Christ, he then describes how the Psalms reveal the changing states of the human soul, moving through each psalm and very deftly summarizing its content and emotional tone, an almost effortless use of the literal sense of the Psalter to pastoral ends without feeling the necessity of Christological allusions. Not again until Luther's discovery of the "faithful synagogue" in the Psalms do we see such a keen eye for the literal sense of the Psalter.⁶³ Then there is Eusebius of Caesarea, for whom no conflict existed between the spiritual application of scripture and the attempt to reconstruct and co-ordinate the history of the entirety of human civilization with the history of God's people, first as Israel, then as the church.⁶⁴ This busy bishop even took the time to compile an exhaustive analysis of the geographical details of the Bible which became a guide to pilgrims who came to the Holy Land to be in the places where God revealed himself to his ancient people.⁶⁵ Language, literature, history and even a degree of public access to scripture's meaning, all of these made up the literal sense as known in the early centuries of the church. It is certainly the case that they knew far less about these things than we do today, and they also did vastly different things with the information they had than we do. Nevertheless, a concern for such matters as language, grammar, literary flow, historical reference, authorial purposes, and open access to the text animated the best of classical patristic exegesis. In the literal sense, in the moment of distancing, the interpreter realizes it is the reader who must adjust to the Bible, not the Bible that must adapt to the reader. This is not about so-called Enlightenment objectivity, claiming to come to the text without presuppositions. Rather, it is a tuning of the ear, a purifying of ourselves to listen to the text, to let it be truly "other."⁶⁶

The interpreters of the Western Synthesis also exemplify the second dimension of interpretation in the rule of faith, which comes—consequently, but also simultaneously—as the moment of address, the movement of proximity and approach. Scripture speaks in and to the faith of the church, becoming a criterion of identity, of truthful witness, and concrete obedience. For these readers, the church's confessions, the clarification of the boundaries of the canon, the ongoing life of service and sacramental worship, and the transformation of the reader in holiness constituted the aim and goal of scripture's revelation. The quest to respond faithfully sends the interpreter back to the text, of course, where the whole dialectic continues in a rhythm of straining to listen above the jangle of the reader's own agendas, questions, and demands, and at the same time, having those very agendas, questions, and demands addressed, spoken to, and transformed in the encounter with God in scripture. Ironically, pre-modern interpreters saw the literal sense as "simple," but saw the applied sense as complex and multiple. So we hear of anagogical, moral, tropological, etc.

senses beyond or above the literal sense, while modern and even post-modern interpreters tend to see the complexity of meaning in the formation or pre-history of the text, i.e. its literal sense. One suspects behind the patristic multiplicity of anagogic senses lies not a complex hermeneutic, but simply the varied ways of the Spirit in causing the inspired Word to become exhalation, contemporary address, *Rede*.

Conclusion

The early church reached its world for Christ. The early church captured the resources and expressive means of formidable world-class cultures and empires in the service of that mission. The early church grasped the heart of Christian theology and articulated it in an enduring form that we still cannot equal. At the heart of these achievements rests the early church's seriousness about reading the Bible, not just for "practical" ministry or the cultivation of piety, but a full immersion into the complete phenomenon that is the Bible. That carnivorous garden with which I began, that place Karl Barth called the "strange new world within the Bible," became for these early Christian interpreters not a place of death, insanity, apostasy, and crisis, nor merely a place they could sojourn briefly, but safely. The scriptures became their permanent abode, their homeland. So may it be for us as well.

End Notes

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 14b; Jerusalem Talmud, Hagigah 2:1. The story exists in several forms. Cf. A. W. Strucan, *A Translation of the Treatise Chagigah from the Babylonian Talmud* (Cambridge University Press, 1891). p. 83. The figure of Elisha ben Abuya has stirred the imaginations of doubters and strugglers for centuries, inspiring the novel *As A Driven Leaf* by Milton Steinberg (Behrman House, New Edition with Forward by Chaim Potok, 1996; Orig. 1939) and Jacob Gordin's haunting, even if spectacularly failed play *Elisha Ben Abuyah* (1906).

² Namely, peshat, remez, derash, and sod.

³ George Steiner, *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989) 25.

⁴ I refrain from naming the culprits! For responsible and balanced general history of exegesis: Henning Graf Reventlow, *History of Biblical Interpretation* (Atlanta: SBL, 4 Vols. 2009-2010). OT specialists dare not neglect the essays edited by Magne Sæbo: *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation*, 1/1: *Antiquity* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1996); 1/2: *The Middle Ages* (2000); II: *From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment* (2008). For ready reference, cf.: Donald K. McKim, ed. *Dictionary of Major Biblical Interpreters* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007). Though somewhat dated, much of great worth can be found in: Peter R. Ackroyd, et. al. eds, *The Cambridge History of the Bible* (3 Volumes; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1963-1970).

⁵ Though this late *terminus* for the patristic era is widely accepted, all also agree that after ca. 450-550, at least by the death of Gregory the Great, biblical exposition shows a palpable shift, becoming more encyclopedic and summative of previous

insights rather than pressing for deeper understanding of the texts. Cf. Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 1477-1478,

⁶ The essay that initially kindled my own interest in this topic, and to which I have constantly returned, is: Rowan Greer, "the Christian Bible and Its Interpretation" in James L. Kugel and Rowan A. Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 107-208. In addition to Greer's seminal contribution, biblicists seeking initiation into ancient hermeneutics benefit from a rich introductory literature. Cf.: John J. O'Keefe and R. R. Reno, *Sanctified Vision: An Introduction to Early Christian Interpretation of the Bible* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 2005); Christopher A. Hall, *Reading Scripture with the Church Fathers* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1998); Manlio Simonetti, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church: An Historical Introduction to Patristic Exegesis* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1994); Serious students will need to work with: Charles Kannengieser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis* (Two Volumes; Leiden: Brill, 2004).

⁷ Anthologies of example texts and discussions of particular exegeses appear in: John L. Thompson, *Reading the Bible With the Dead: What You Can Learn From the History of Exegesis That You Can't Learn From Exegesis Alone* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007); William Yarchin, *History of Biblical Interpretation: A Reader* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004); Joseph W. Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation*, (Message of the Fathers of the Church, 9; Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1988); Karlfried Froelich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984).

⁸ David C. Steinmetz, "The Superiority of Pre-Critical Exegesis," *Memory and Mission: Theological Reflections on the Christian Past* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1988) 143-163.

⁹ Note, for example, Steinmetz, a strong advocate of "pre-critical" exegesis, who advocates interpreters finding "multiple meanings" in scripture. But he does so not because the Bible is a unique book with a divine author. Far from it! He categorically states that he agrees with Jowett (!) that the Bible is to be read "like any other book" but then asks, "How does one read other books?" From here he turns to "modern literary criticism" and its claims of polyvalence in texts, thus dispensing with the indispensable presupposition of pre-critical Christian exegesis even why asserting its superiority! Paradoxically, he then falls back into claims of limits on the "field of possible meanings." (Steinmetz, "Superiority," 159-163)

¹⁰ For accessible summaries, cf.: Dana Robert, *Christian Mission: How Christianity Became a World Religion*; Dale T. Irvin, Scott W. Sunquist, *History of the World Christian Movement, Vol. 1*

¹¹ Cf. the seminal analysis of Gerhard Ebeling, "Church History as the History of the Exposition of Scripture," *The Word of God and Tradition Historical studies interpreting the divisions of Christianity* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1968) 11-31.

¹² C. H. Roberts, "Books in the Graeco-Roman World and in the New Testament," in *Cambridge History of the Bible* 1:48-66.

¹³ Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 11-16. Also: Harry Y. Gamble, *Books and Readers in the Early Church* (New Haven: Yale, 1995).

¹⁴ Cf. Roberts, *Christian Mission*. 7-52.

¹⁵ Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 13-16, 59, 288-289.

¹⁶ Most classically seen in: Adolph von Harnack *What is Christianity Harnack*, (*Germ. Das Wesen des Christentums, 1900, ET 1901*) and perpetuated today by many

popular and scholarly writers.

¹⁷ T. Boman, *Hebrew Thought Compared with the Greek*; J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*. Note the decisive, even if excessive, rebuttal of James Barr: *The Semantics of Biblical Language*. Indeed, the whole linguistic argument collapses upon the realization that “Hebrew” was not distinctively “hebraic” or Israelite, since it was merely the dialect spoken in Late Bronze and Iron Age Canaan even *before the Israelites arrived there*. The language was part of Israel’s “pagan” legacy and thus would not encode uniquely Israelite sensibilities, just as the almost linguistically identical dialect of the Moabite Stone (ca. 850 B.C.) does not linguistically encode a unique “moabite mentality.”

¹⁸ Wolfhart Pannenberg, “The Appropriation of the Philosophical Concept of God as a Dogmatic Problem of Early Christian Theology,” *Basic Questions in Theology: Collected Essays, Vol. II* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1971) 119–183.

¹⁹ Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 49.

²⁰ Kannengieser, *Handbook of Patristic Exegesis*, 674.

²¹ For an introduction to the exegesis of Justin Martyr, cf. Willis A. Shotwell, *The Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr* (London: SPCK, 1965); O. Skarsaune, *The Proof from Prophecy: A Study in Justin-Martyr’s Proof-Text Tradition*, (Leiden: Brill, 1987); Kannengieser *Handbook*, 434–438; Saebø, *Hebrew Bible—Old Testament*, 389–410.

²² Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 109–120.

²³ The Donatist controversy in North Africa likely represents a watershed in the church’s experience with coercion. Augustine resisted the use of imperial power to compel the Donatists to return to the catholic church, but did not object to imperial action to stop acts of violence and vandalism by the donatist majority against the catholic minority. When imperial power shifted to attempt, by modest means for that era, to nudge the Donatists to return to the catholic church, Augustine hesitantly surrendered his objections. Later, medieval church leaders cited Augustine as a precedent for far more grave resort to force, including acts of war (Henry Chadwick, *Augustine: A Very Short Introduction* [Oxford: Oxford University, 1986] 80–90).

²⁴ For an outstanding study of this issue in contemporary Christian theology: Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007).

²⁵ Cf. now: James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta: SBL, 2010).

²⁶ Novation penned the earliest known Latin treatise presenting the nascent orthodox concept of the Trinity: Russell J. DeSimone, trans. Novation: *The Writings*. (Washington, D.C.: Catholic University of America, 1974) 13–111.

²⁷ The literature on these topics is so vast as to defy citation. The beginner does well to start with: Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale, 2007). A workman-like exposition of the debates and positions shaping the major statements of faith in early Christianity is: Leo Donald David, *The First Seven Ecumenical Councils (325–787): Their History and Theology* (Collegeville: Michael Glazier, 1983). A more extensive survey appears in the first half of: Roger E. Olson, *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1999).

²⁸ Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 109–208.

²⁹ The point is made programmatically and repeatedly by George Steiner, esp.

in *Real Presences* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989) and *Grammars of Creation* (New Haven: Yale, 2001) and animates his principle work, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University, 3rd Ed. 1998). The radical dissociation of the word from the world, and of both from any notion of “the Word” constitutes for Steiner the central madness and agony of contemporary thought.

³⁰ Walter Brueggeman, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 92. Brueggeman’s sudden invocation of modernity’s alleged liberation of the Bible from the clutches of the church strikes the present reader as ironic given his immediately preceding discussion centering around the collapse of modernity’s epistemological consensus.

³¹ Kugel and Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation*, 109-125, esp. 124.

³² See Oskar Skarsaune’s analysis in Saebo, *Hebrew Bible—Old Testament*, 389-410

³³ Joseph T. Lienhard, “Origen and the Crisis of the Old Testament in the Early Church,” *Pro Ecclesia* 9:3 (2000) 355-366, esp. 358-359.

³⁴ Cf. Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 450-453. The classic study on Marcion has historically been: Adolph von Harnack, *Marcion: The Gospel of An Alien God* (Durham, NC: Labyrinth, 1990, orig. Germ. 1924). But see now: Sebastian Moll, *The Arch-Heretic Marcion*. (WUNT 250; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

³⁵ Harnack, *Marcion*, 418.

³⁶ For an orientation and bibliographic resources: Saebo, *Hebrew Bible-Old Testament*, 1/1:384-387; Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 423-424. Issues of authorship, pseudonymity, etc. need not be treated here.

³⁷ The inclusion of this work, along with the “Shepherd of Hermas” in *Codex Sinaiticus* (4th Century) does not necessarily imply any elevated status for these works.

³⁸ DeSimone, trans. *Novation*, 137-161.

³⁹ For overviews and bibliographic resources, cf: Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 477-506; Saebo, *Hebrew Bible-Old Testament*, 421-429. The work of John Lawson, *The Biblical Theology of Saint Irenaeus* (London: Fipworth, 1948) now finds little following (Cf. Childs, *The Struggle to Understand Isaiah as Christian Scripture* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004] 45-55). Recent analysis includes Thomas Holsinger-Friesen, *Irenaeus and Genesis: A Study of Competition in Early Christian Hermeneutics* (*Journal of Theological Interpretation* Supplements, 1; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2009). The analysis of Rowan Greer remains cogent and helpful as well: James Kugel, Rowan Greer, *Early Biblical Interpretation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1986) 107-208.

⁴⁰ John Behr, trans. *St. Irenaeus of Lyons: On the Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* (Crestwood, NY: St. Valdimir’s Seminary, 1997).

⁴¹ Many Christians of the 2nd century knew the OT mainly through “Christianizing Targums” which some Christian apologists revered more than the traditional OT text. That Jews had begun producing new Greek translations of the OT in reaction to the Christian adoption of the LXX increased Christians’ suspicion of “anti-christian” Greek recensions. (Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 288). On the evidence of such compilations, cf. Rendel Harris, *Testimonies* (2 vols; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1916). Shotwell (*Biblical Exegesis of Justin Martyr*, 69-70) argued that Justin actually used a version of the Greek OT that was closer to the Jewish versions of Aquila and Symmachus than it was to the traditional LXX.

⁴² Cf. the magisterial and provocative treatment of the theological inter-relations between the OT and NT in: Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1956) 1/2: 145-121, esp. 70-101.

⁴³ Cf. Francis Young, *Biblical Exegesis*, 117-213.

⁴⁴ For a representative set of voices on Origen's hermeneutic, cf. Henri de Lubac, *History and Spirit: The Understanding of Scripture According to Origen* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2005; orig. Fr. 1950); Elizabeth Ann Dively Lauro, *The Soul and Spirit of Scripture Within Origen's Exegesis* (Atlanta: SBL, 2005); John David Dawson, *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California, 2002). Bibliographic sketches of the Alexandrian school and specifically, Origen, may be found in: Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 523-574; Saebo, *Hebrew Bible—Old Testament*, 451-542. Origen's work is so demanding the shell-shocked newcomer is advised to consult: John Anthony McGuckin, Ed. *The Westminster Handbook to Origen* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 2004).

⁴⁵ Cf. Karlfried Froelich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 48-78, esp. 59-62; also Cf. *Also Philocalia of Origen*, George Lewis, trans. (Maidstone, Oriental Orthodox Library, 2007) 17-37. The complete text of *First Principles* must be reconstructed from excerpts in the *Philocalia* and from the Latin translations of Rufinus. The 3-fold sense explicitly shapes Origen's commentary on the Song of Solomon, e.g.: *Origen: The Song of Songs—Commentary and Homilies* (Ancient Christian Writers, 26; New York: Newman, 1956) 58-70.

⁴⁶ Quotation from: Karlfried Froelich, *Biblical Interpretation in the Early Church* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1984) 63.

⁴⁷ E.g. De Lubac, *History and Spirit*, 103-158.

⁴⁸ For a sample of the range of Origen's historical and textual interests, cf. R. B. Tollinton, trans., *Selections from the Commentaries and Homilies of Origen* (London: SPCK, 1929) 94-127 ⁴⁹

⁵⁰ Theophilus of Antioch's comments on Genesis ca. 180 AD are among the earliest distinct examples of the Antiochene style of exegesis. (Kannegieser, *Handbook*, 472; Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation*, 31).

⁵¹ Relevant bibliographic guidance and useful summaries may be found in: Kannegieser, *Handbook*, 769-839; Saebo, *Hebrew Bible—Old Testament*, 543-568. Cf. also: Robert C. Hill, *Reading the Old Testament at Antioch* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Young (*Biblical Exegesis*) offers throughout her study a penetrating and fresh understanding of the inter-relations between the Alexandrian and Antiochene exegetical sensibilities.

⁵² Steiner, *Real Presences*, p. 69

⁵³ William S. Babcock, trans. *Tyconius: The Book of Rules* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

⁵⁴ The best starting point in analyzing the role of the literal sense in the history of interpretation remains. Brevard S. Childs, "The Sensus Literalis of Scripture: An Ancient and Modern Problem," H. Donner, ed., *Beiträge zur alttestamentlichen Theologie*. Fs. H. Zimmerli, (Göttingen 1977) 80-93.

⁵⁵ In Trigg, *Biblical Interpretation*, 246.

⁵⁶ Kannegieser, *Handbook*, 145-163; Robert Grant, *Heresy and Criticism*; Francis Young, *Biblical Exegesis*.

⁵⁷ *On Christian Teaching*, R. P. H. Greene, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University

Press, 2008) 64.

⁵⁸ *On Christian Teaching*, 32.

⁵⁹ Augustine, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis, I:21," in *St. Augustine on Genesis*, Edmund Hill, trans. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 2002) p. 188-189

⁶⁰ The literature on Augustine defies competent review by any but the specialist, so the reader is directed to the bibliographic essays in Kannengieser (*Handbook*, 1149-1233) and Saebo (*Hebrew Bible—Old Testament*, 701-730). A helpful collection of essays may be found in: Pamela Bright, ed. *Augustine and the Bible* (Notre Dame, 1999; orig. Fr. 1986).

⁶¹ Relevant introductions appear in: Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 1094-1133; Saebo, *Hebrew Bible—Old Testament*, 663-681.

⁶² Conveniently found as an appendix in the *St. Vladimir's Seminary edition of St. Athanasius On the Incarnation* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary, 1993) 97-119 Cf. also James D. Ernest, *The Bible in Athanasius of Alexandria* (Atlanta: SBL, 2004).

⁶³ Cf. the account in James Samuel Preus, *From Shadow to Promise: Old Testament Interpretation from Augustine to the Young Luther* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap, 1969).

⁶⁴ Cf. Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 675-683; Saebo, *Hebrew Bible—Old Testament*, 534-536. Sadly, Eusebius is often considered a part of the "Origenist" heritage and his interest in the literal sense is missed.

⁶⁵ Now available in a fine edition: G. S. P. Freeman-Grenville, Rupert L. Chapman, III, Joan E. Taylor, eds. *The Onomasticon of Eusebius* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2003). For a compelling account of the role of the land itself in formative Christianity, cf. R. Wilken, *The Land Called Holy: Palestine in Christian History and Thought* (New Haven: Yale, 1992). The travels of a pilgrim in the late 4th or early 5th century, cf. George E. Gringas, trans., *Egeria: Diary of a Pilgrimage* (Ancient Christian Writers, 38; Crestwood, NY: Newman, 1970). Ironically, Eusebius would have surprised many contemporary proponents of so-called theological interpretation in his enthusiasm for a volume such as David A. Dorsey, *The Roads and Highways of Ancient Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1991).

⁶⁶ Fine summaries of the aspects comprising the literal and spiritual senses may be found in: Kannengieser, *Handbook*, 167-205, 206-269.